

Study Abroad, Cultural Comparison and Action

Michael Stambolis-Ruhstorfer's article is the fruit of a two-year research project. Like most Dickinsonians, Michael chose to spend his junior year abroad in one of the many programs of study that the College maintains throughout the world. Because he was a French major, Michael naturally chose to go to Toulouse, where the students live with French families and take classes at Dickinson's *Centre* and at one of the four universities in Toulouse, the second-largest university town in France after Paris. In the fall semester, he took several French literature and history courses at the *Université de Toulouse II–Le Mirail*. Like many of the students in the Toulouse program, Michael did an internship in the spring semester in addition to his university courses. These internships offer the students the opportunity to work in a French business or organization—either private or public—and to learn about French society through direct participation in it. Internships have an academic component that requires students to write and present a report at the end of the semester before a panel of examiners, which includes the Dickinson resident director as well as the on-site supervisor. In the past students have worked at such diverse sites as the aeronautics firm Airbus Industries, the Toulouse city hall, the Purpan General Hospital, the *Médecins du Monde* association, and the United States Consulate, to name but a few.

Michael decided to do his internship with the Toulouse chapter of AIDES, a country-wide AIDS prevention organization. Michael invested much time and effort in this enterprise and was one of the year's most successful internships. Furthermore, the experience gave him the idea to pursue the same work once he came back to the United States and to compare the approach to AIDS prevention in both countries. This became the basis of his senior thesis which he asked me to direct. We met on a regular basis throughout his senior year and he reported to me on his experience as an intern with the AIDS Community Alliance (ACA) in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. In parallel with his field work and observations, Michael began to establish a theoretical basis to his research by reading the literature dealing with the sociological impact of AIDS

on the gay community. His premise was that, like any other aspect of society, AIDS prevention was deeply affected by cultural considerations and that a comparative study of the ways the French and the Americans have dealt with the AIDS epidemic would provide an interesting case study for cultural analysis. As a true practitioner of cultural analysis, Michael takes great care not to favor either of the approaches. On the contrary, he points out the advantages and the drawbacks of the way each country has dealt with the epidemic.

The benefits of research such as Michael's are many. The immediate one is that it contributes to a better understanding of French and American societies and provides another example of the way in which cultural paradigms affect every aspect of the life of a particular country. Michael's research shows that a comparative cultural analysis of France and the United States reaches the same basic conclusions, whatever aspect of society one chooses to examine. A particular society's response to and defense against an epidemic is a cultural creation and its analysis is as pregnant as the analysis of every other cultural object. Another contribution of Michael's research is that it reveals and explains a major difference between the American and the French gay cultural identity. Both groups have to mediate their quest for recognition in the context of the dominant cultural and political context of their country: the French gays for instance, as he explains in his conclusion, have to reconcile their identity with the French Republican model. Finally, on a more practical level, Michael was able to use his commendable work and dedication to the fight against AIDS and his experience abroad as the material for a remarkable intellectual exercise. In doing so, he brought together several aspects of his academic experience to produce an outstanding senior thesis, and in this sense exemplifies how study abroad research can unify and bring focus to undergraduate studies.

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